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ABSTRACT

The Internet seems an ideal medium for fostering and supporting informal adult learning because it allows adults to seek out and use resources independently, control the pace and direction of learning, and talk to and consult others. Because it provides access to information, encourages meaningful interaction with information or material, and brings people together, the Internet supports learning that is constructivist in nature and that builds on prior knowledge. Issues have been raised related to the Internet and its role in informal learning, including access; degree of control that governments or other agencies might exercise over information available through the Internet; incomplete understanding of the extent and type of learning that is occurring; skills needed to engage in self-directed learning on the Internet; motivation for those who use the Internet for informal learning; and how technology can be improved. (Contains a 20-item annotated bibliography of resources that provide additional information about the Internet and informal adult learning.) (YLB)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERT

NO. 50

Informal Adult Learning and the Internet

by Susan Imel
2003

The Internet seems an ideal medium for fostering and supporting informal adult learning and "could possibly be classified as one of the most powerful and important self-directed learning tools in existence" (Gray 1999, p. 120). The Internet has facilitated informal learning because it allows adults to seek out and use resources independently, control the pace and direction of their learning, and talk to and consult others (Boshier and Pisutova 2002). Because it provides access to information, encourages meaningful interaction with information or material, and brings people together, the Internet supports learning that is constructivist in nature, which builds on prior knowledge (Wilson and Lowry 2000). The Internet has supported informal learning in a number of settings such as the workplace (Berg 1999; Weintraub 1998), and among diverse populations such as older adults (Hazzlewood 2001), labor movement activists (Sawchuk 2001), and clients in the mental health system (Egan 2002).

Several issues have been raised related to the Internet and its role in informal learning. Access remains a major hurdle, although some initiatives are providing public access. Bruce (2001), for example, reports on efforts in the province of New Brunswick to create community access centers in rural communities and small towns. However, access does not always result in use, as discovered by Gorard, Selwyn, and Madden (2003) in their study of the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) and technology-based learning in the United Kingdom. After surveying nearly 6,000 households, they concluded: "ICT can go *some* way to altering patterns of participation in education for *some* individuals but should on no account be assumed to be a universal panacea to achieving a truly inclusive 'learning society'" (p. 293).

Both Jarvis (2000) and Gray (1999) question the degree of control that might be exercised by governments or other agencies over information available through the Internet. In light of the movement that equates lifelong learning with learning for work or learning to be a productive citizen, the available information might be shaped to fulfill this goal (Jarvis 2000). Jarvis cites a number of reports (e.g., Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, European Union) that reflect what he calls an "apprehensiveness toward uncontrolled learning," concluding that the reports reflect "an underlying belief that people's learning must be influenced even if it cannot be entirely controlled" (p. 347). Gray considers how educational institutions can control both content and learning, particularly with teachers who maintain power over learners.

Lack of research about informal adult learning on the Internet is a barrier to fully understanding the extent and type of learning that is taking place. Boshier and Pisutova (2002) report that there has been little theory developed that explains the use of the Internet in learning outside of formal courses. Gray (1999) lists a number of areas in which more information is needed, including the kind of skills needed to engage in self-directed learning on the Internet, what motivates those who use the Internet for informal learning, and how technology can be improved. The resources that follow provide additional information about the Internet and informal adult learning.

Resources

Berg, G. A. "Workplace Learning on the Internet." ***WebNet Journal*** (October-December 1999): 5-6.
The convergence of an increased emphasis on learning in organizations and the evolution of computer and telecommunications technology is leading to important changes in workplace learning. Because the majority of workplace learning occurs informally, computers on every desk provide the opportunity to bring about both the informality and the integration necessary for the kind of workplace learning needed in the future.

Boshier, R., and Pisutova, K. "Using the Internet for Informal Learning about Joining the Brain Drain: A Qualitative Central/East European and Pacific Perspective." In ***Proceedings of the Adult Education Research Conference, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC, May 24th, 2002***, edited by J. Pettit et al. Raleigh: NCSU, 2002.
An online survey of Slovaks, New Zealanders, and others suggests that the Internet expedites leaving home—largely because of its informality and the way it erodes official control.

Bruce, D. "Building Social Capital and Community Learning Networks in Community Internet Access Centres." In ***Learning to Manage Change: Developing Regional Communities for a Local-Global Millennium***, edited by I. Falk. Leabrook, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2001. (ED 461 472) http://www.ncver.edu.au/pubs/falk2001/ch21.pdf
As a part of a strategy to develop a highly Internet- and computer-literate society to take advantage of emerging employment and social opportunities, the Province of New Brunswick, Canada has created nearly 200 community access centers in rural communities and small towns. The centers can function as community learning networks and create alternative learning environments for adults who have been marginalized in moving toward the "new economy."

Cahoon, B. "Adult Learning and the Internet: Themes and Things to Come." ***New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*** no. 78 (Summer 1998): 71-76.
Adults learn about using the Internet through informal means and their experiences with it are consistent with the conventional wisdom about adult learners, including the importance of life experiences and social situations in motivating their learning and the need to apply learning quickly to practical tasks.

Downes, S. "The Fragmentation of Learning." ***Education Canada*** 41, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 4-7.
Information and communication technologies have vastly increased access to information and educational opportunities. Demand for online learning opportunities may result in fragmentation of learning opportunities and delivery modes, where the autonomous learner chooses the learning experience that meets his or her needs.

Egan, J. "Pedagogy of the Depressed: Mental Health Consumers, Computers and Empowerment." ***Convergence*** 35, no. 1 (2002): 82-89.
The Shelter Society is a grassroots mental health consumers organization whose members sought access to the Internet and instigated a computer training program to improve their self-advocacy skills. The program fostered a sense of empowerment and prepared participants to make informed decisions.

Gorard, S.; Selwyn, N.; and Madden, L. "Logged on to Learning? Assessing the Impact of Technology on Participation in Lifelong Learning." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 22, no. 3 (May-June 2003): 281-296.
Analysis of survey data of over 5,000 British adults showed that access to ICT was associated with age, class, and educational attainment. Technology did not increase participation in learning among those not already inclined to participate.

Gray, D. E. "The Internet in Lifelong Learning: Liberation or Alienation?" ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 18, no. 2 (March-April 1999): 119-126.
The Internet has great potential for enabling adults to become aware of and develop their learning potential. Issues include possible control by those with vested interests, lack of learning materials, and inequality of access.

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Hazzlewood, J. ***The TALANT: The Third Age Learner Accessing New Technology. CSLRA Discussion Paper D11.*** Launceston, Tasmania: Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania, 2001. http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2001/D11-2001.pdf
Based on a study of older adults accessing new technology via the Internet to participate in learning opportunities, no generalizations can be made. Many older adults experience isolation of one kind or another and it can be overcome by learning to use computers and access the Internet.

Jarvis, P. "Globalisation, the Learning Society and Comparative Education." ***Comparative Education*** 36, no. 3 (2000): 343-355.
Information technology, empowered by those who control capital, has become the global infrastructure, resulting in the development of learning societies as superstructural phenomena. Four dimensions of the learning society—futuristic, planned, reflective, and market—are analyzed, and their implications for the study of comparative education are explored.

Literacy and Technology. Ensuring Universal Rights to Literacy and Basic Education. A Series of 29 Booklets Documenting Workshops Held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. Hamburg, Germany, July 14-18, 1997. Hamburg, Germany: UNESCO Institute for Education, 1999. (ED 435 005) http://www.education.unesco.org/uie/confintea/pdf/3f.pdf
Although technology is not the answer to all educational problems, it is proving to be a useful tool in improving the quality and efficiency of literacy provision in formal, nonformal, and informal education sectors. Adopting technology demands a selection process for determining which technology is appropriate, by and for whom it will be used, and for what kind of communication and content. Technology must be viewed in the wider political, social, and economic context rather than merely in terms of hardware and software packages.

Luciani, T. ***Second NALL Bibliography on Informal and Non-Formal Learning. NALL Working Paper.*** Toronto: New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2001. (ED 465 027) http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/48TracyLuciani.pdf
This bibliography with 1,273 entries is an updated supplement to the preliminary 1997 bibliography on informal adult learning and is divided into seven sections. The section on informal learning and technology contains 34 entries.

Medley, M. D. "The Potential of Listservs for Continuing Professional Education." ***Journal of Continuing Higher Education*** 47, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 25-31.
The use of listservs in continuing professional education (CPE) supports learning, especially the immediate kind of learning that is needed in many situations. The democracy of the Internet supports the claim of varied interests being part of any discussion, thus satisfying the critical view of CPE.

Northcote, M., and Kendle, A. "Informal Online Networks for Learning: Making Use of Incidental Learning through Recreation." In ***Proceedings of the International Education Research Conference, Fremantle, Australia, December 2-6, 2001***, compiled by P. L. Jeffery. Melbourne: Australian Association for Research in Education, 2001. http://www.aare.edu.au/01pap/nor01596.htm
Contemporary students are expected to possess technology-related and information management skills and expertise. By accessing a variety of recreational digital resources individuals can experience effective learning through these experiences in an incidental, informal manner.

Odasz, F. ***Common Ground: A Cross-Cultural Self-Directed Learner's Internet Guide.*** 2000. (ED 447 797) http://lone-eagles.com.htm
Intended for use as a customizable resource for helping people understand how to use Internet tools and resources, this guide presents hands-on exercises and resources ranging from general overviews to in-depth exploration. Information is presented in four successive levels of self-empowerment: (1) becoming a self-directed learner; (2) self-publishing; (3) building learning communities through mentoring and collaboration; and (4) global citizenship and enlightened expectations.

Orfinger, B. "Virtual Science Museums as Learning Environments: Interactions for Education." ***Informal Learning Review,*** 1998. http://www.informallearning.com/archive/1998-1112-a.htm
Given the popularity of the Web, it is not surprising that a large number of both formal and informal educational organizations, including science museums, have established themselves online. An examination of 16 science museum websites revealed that virtual museum visits can have comparable educational value to actual science museum field trips.

Owen, C.; Pollard, J.; Kilpatrick, S.; and Rumley, D. ***Electronic Learning Communities? Lessons from the Ether. CRLRA Discussion Paper D6.*** Launceston, Australia: Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania, 1998. http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/1998/D06-1998.pdf
A research study investigated how learning through e-mail discussion differs from learning in traditional group formats. Findings suggest that (1) group-based e-mail communication serves a number of different purposes; (2) people use lists for different purposes; (3) dialogue around issues of genuine importance to people can become heated; and (4) to resolve potential points of misunderstanding, group members could monitor their own posts.

Sawchuk, P. H. ***Online Learning for Labour Movement Activists. NALL Working Paper.*** Toronto: New Approaches to Lifelong Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2001. (ED 461 735) http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/res/46onlinelearning.htm
A study explored informal learning in relation to online communications and working class people's use of computers as a socially situated practice rooted in collective, communal relationships. Barriers to online learning included resources; time; distance; extensive reading and writing requirements; and "communication literacy," a basic appreciation of the mechanics of interaction, turn-taking, and explicit framing and reframing of the situation.

Weintraub, R. S. "Informal Learning in the Workplace through Desktop Technology: A Case Study in a Sales Division of a Large Corporation." Ed.D. dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1998.
Corporate educators do not clearly understand the role and impact of technology in informal learning. There is a need to develop more reflective practitioners, modify the context for learning, develop more learning strategies compatible with information technologies that incorporate reflection, and adapt and facilitate informal learning processes through desktop technologies. Adult educators, managers, and information technologists should to work together to create an environment in which people are motivated and facile and technology is accessible and adaptable.

Wilson, B., and Lowry, M. "Constructivist Learning on the Web." ***New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*** no. 88 (Winter 2000): 79-88.
The Web is a medium in which learners can construct meaning through self-directed inquiry or collaboration. Key principles for effective use of the Web for learning include the following: provide access to rich sources of information, encourage meaningful interaction with content, and bring people together to challenge, support, or respond to each other.

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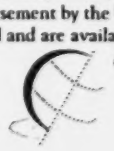

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